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Life Goals of Finnish Social Services Students

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Abstract

This exploratory mixed methods case study examines the life goals of Finnish social services students (N = 151) and whether they justify their goals with self- or other-focused reasoning. Purpose is understood as reflecting the students' life goals that benefit not only oneself but also others. On the basis of this study, close relationships, pursuit of happiness, self-actualization, and hedonistic goals described these students' life goals. Most of the students justified their goals through self-benefits only. One-fifth of the students found purpose in familial concerns and one-fourth in pursuing a helping profession. Students' life goals and purposes are discussed particularly in relation to helping profession.

Keywords: Social services students, life goals, purpose, self- and other-focused goals

Life goals of Finnish social service students

Introduction

The social services profession in Finland

This exploratory mixed methods case study investigates what kinds of life goals Finnish social services students identify themselves with and whether they justify their goals with self- or other-focused reasoning. According to international comparative studies, social democratic Nordic welfare models have been found to be the best in decreasing inequalities among citizens (Arts & Gelissen, 2012). The aim of Finnish welfare services is to advance the collective good and social purposes (Kautto, 2012) for which social services students are educated. In the sphere of publicly organized welfare services in Finland, social services professionals take on varying roles, such as kindergarten teachers, instructors at children's homes and supported housing units, as well as rehabilitative work instructors and family workers (Talentia, n.d.). Also, work with immigrants has grown substantially due to the instabilities in Syria and other parts of the world. Social services professionals are continuously needed in order to provide publicly organized services. Their employment rate is high (Statistics Finland, 2017).

In Finland, social services education at universities of applied sciences, as well as social work education at traditional research universities, continue to be attractive choice among applicants (Education Statistics Finland, n.d.). Students in both of these higher education programs come from academically oriented upper secondary education or vocationally oriented education. In 2016, approximately 2000 students started in social services education programs and approximately 800 in social work studies (Education Statistics Finland, n.d.).

Both social services and social work are characterized as helping professions. A helping profession is defined as a profession which uses specialized and deliberate attempts to help those in need. They included professionals such as doctors, priests, teachers, psychotherapists and social

workers (Guggenbuhl-Craig, 1971). Professionals in social work deal with complex and heterogeneous networks of human beings and communities (Satka, Kääriäinen, & Yliruka, 2016). They must be capable of making good decisions in respect to their clients' varying needs even though their work environment may have limited resources and contrasting expectations. Professionals in social services foster empowerment, sense of agency, and purposefulness of their clients (Chan, 2017). However, skills to support these processes are linked with one's understanding of one's own life goals and purposes (Tirri & Kuusisto, 2016). Furthermore, in social services work, personal and professional growth are strongly intertwined which should be reflected while they are students (Urdang, 2010).

Research on social services education in the Finnish context are few, and *social services* students' life goals—or even general motives to study the field—have not been investigated. There are a few studies in northern Europe on *social work* students' motives to study the field. Hackett, Kuronen, Matthies, and Kresal (2003) show that Finnish social work students were motivated almost exclusively by helping other people. More recent studies in Estonia (Toros & Medar, 2015) and in Sweden (Liedgren & Evlhage, 2015) reveal that social work students hold both other-focused societal concerns and self-focused individualist motives to study the field. In comparison, studies of Finnish youth generally show that they are mostly self-focused and oriented toward close relationships, yet they still value helping others (Myllyniemi, 2017). Self- and family focused aspirations have been depicted among the majority of higher education students generally, and in a variety of countries (Moran, 2009).

Other-focused purposes and self-focused life goals

Purpose is defined as "a stable intention to accomplish something that is both meaningful to the self and of consequence beyond the self over time" (Damon, Menon, & Bronk, 2003, p. 212). Purpose denotes those goals that touch the lives of others and not only oneself. Helping professions

inherently include benefitting others. Thus, Damon et al.'s (2003) theory is utilized as a theoretical framework to study Finnish social services students' life goals. Life goals (Robert & Robins, 2000), in turn, are understood as representations of possible purposes in life (see Bronk & Finch, 2010).

Previous purpose studies have operationalized Robert and Robins' (2000) life goals along the dimensions of other-focus and self-focus. The other-focused goals are: relationships, social life goals, religious life goals, political influence, and aesthetics, which all show some degree of anticipated beyond-the-self effects (Damon, 2008; see also Bundick & Tirri, 2014; Moran, 2015). Hedonistic and economic life goals illustrate self-focus (Damon, 2008). In this study, we use this categorization to identify and evaluate the life goals of Finnish social services students and to analyze the students' justifications why they want to accomplish these goals.

Contents of life goals indicate the tendencies of students' other-focus and self-focus, and justifications offer a more in-depth view. For example, social life goals of helping other people can be based solely on self-serving reasoning like feeling oneself to be important or being able to exert power over others. Reflecting and directing moral commitments toward serving others indicates authentic purpose, self-awareness, and prosocial moral reasoning capability (Moran, 2009). For example, having a primarily other-focused moral motivation for civic engagement is associated with higher scores in community service, political activity, and civic intention compared to self-serving civic motivation (Malin, Tirri, & Liauw, 2015).

Understanding the particular content and reasoning of life goals is important in social services work because one's personality is considered a working tool (Urdang, 2010). Disconnection between personal and professional selves may even hinder the social services professional's real presence in professional encounters (see Rodgers & Reider-Roth, 2006). In Finland, due to decreased economical resources, the government is reorganizing the social and health care services fields on a large scale (Health, social services and regional government reform,

2017). Professionals have to adapt to organizational changes and, most likely, to an increasing workload. Salaries are low, which means these professionals likely are driven by motives other than economic rewards. Given these challenges, life purpose can shield social services workers' ability to deal with stressful and emotionally demanding situations at work, and purpose has been shown in other countries to induce job satisfaction and work engagement (Itzick, Kagan, & Ben-Ezra, 2016). We expect that the findings of this study of Israeli social workers is a plausible model for the Finnish context as well.

Our study examines the life goals of young adults, mostly females in their late twenties. It is generally believed that purpose development begins during adolescence (Bronk, 2014), and that the college context supports development of other-focused purposes as college experiences provide new perspectives and possibilities to contribute to the community (Malin, Reilly, Quinn, & Moran, 2013; Moran, 2009). Even more relevant to our study is the finding that study programs and career paths in the helping professions offer more structured opportunities for development of other-focused purposes than, for example, creative careers (Malin et al., 2013).

Therefore, this study aims to answer the following research questions: What kinds of self-focused and other-focused life goals do Finnish social services students identify with? Do these students justify their goals through a focus on themselves or also on others? Our expectations are that the social services students investigated in this study have both other-focused life goals and other-focused justifications for their goals. In other words, they exhibit purpose.

Method

Participants

Data were collected at the Metropolia University of Applied Sciences during the fall of 2015. As can be seen from the demographic data (Table 1), the Finnish social services students

were predominantly female (94 %) with non-immigrant backgrounds (92%) and a mean age of 28 years (SD =7.03). Social services studies take 3-1/2 years to complete. The students were first, second, third and fourth year students.

Table 1
Demographic information for respondents

	N	%
Age (*M*=28; *SD* =7.03, *Median*=25)		
Gender		
Female	142	94
Male	9	6
Year of study (from total 3.5 years)		
1st year student	41	27
2nd year student	49	33
3rd year student	38	25
4th year student	23	15
Immigrant in Finland	12	8
Non-Immigrant in Finland	139	92

This study is a secondary analysis of data collected in the first, start-of-semester survey of a larger study composed of three online surveys during the semester. The participants were recruited from courses that included hours actually working in social services organizations. The corresponding author was present during the classes to answer students' questions in order to verify the survey. As a minor compensation, snacks were offered to the students on campus while they answered the surveys during their classes, and movie tickets were given through a drawing to the students who were off-campus. The overall response rate was 96 percent.

Measures

We used two measures collated into the Youth Purpose Around the World survey, online version (Moran, 2014). These measures were translated from English into Finnish by a native Finnish speaker, then back-translated to English to verify accuracy of meaning.

The students' life goals were identified using the Life Goals Questionnaire (Robert & Robins, 2000) with 20 items that were factored into seven major life goals: relationship (α = .618), hedonistic (α = .621), social (α = .640), economic (α = .737), religious (α = .728), political (α = .529), and aesthetic (α = .791). The items were rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale, using the question: "How important are the following goals in your life?" (1 = *not important to me*, 5 = *very important to me*). For example, the hedonistic life goals factor included the items: having new and different experiences, having an exciting lifestyle, and having fun. The social life goals factor included the items: volunteering in the community and helping others in need.

Along with this quantitative measure, the students answered two open-ended questions: "What do you think is your life purpose?" and "Why do you want to accomplish this life purpose?" (Magen, 1998).

Analytic strategy and coding

Means and standard deviations were tallied for the scales within Roberts and Robins' (2000) Life Goals Questionnaire (Table 2). There were no missing data (N = 151).

For the open-ended questions, 149 students answered, but seven students did not identify a life goal content in their answers, and five students said that they had not found their purpose. These participants were removed, leaving N=137. A qualitative content analysis of these answers used Robert and Robins' (2000) seven categories as an analytical framework. The unit of analysis was words, phrases or sentences that expressed one specific life goal content. If a student addressed the same life goal category in more than one way, it was nevertheless calculated as one content. For example, becoming a mother, valuing family, and enjoying close people around were coded into the relationships category as one life goal content. Altogether 345 units of analysis were identified. Examples of quotations for each code category can be found in Table 2.

Since some of the student's life goals did not fit the Robert and Robins' (2000) categories, new content categories were created inductively. They were named using students' own expressions as closely as possible (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). Three content categories were identified: happiness, self-actualization, and health (Table 2). Happiness in the students' answers was described as a desire to be happy with one's life. Self-actualization was addressed as wanting to live a life that looked like one's own, doing personally meaningful things, having personally satisfying work, and actualizing one's dreams and desires. Health referred to holistic well-being both physically and mentally. Examples of quotations for each code category can be found in Table 2.

Life goal categories then were identified as either self- or other-focused on the basis of previous research (Bundick & Tirri, 2014; Damon, 2008; Moran, 2015). Self-focused life goals were: hedonistic, economic, happiness, self-actualization, and health. Other-focused life goals were: relationships, social, religious, political influence, and aesthetics.

A second analysis determined whether students defined the reason for their goals through benefits to themselves only or to other people as well. The unit of analysis was the whole answer. A qualitative content analysis of students' justifications for their life goal contents was conducted utilizing a classification from Bronk and Finch (2010) focused on self or other. We further coded statements in the other-focus category by indicating prosocial moral reasoning (see Moran, 2009), which was specified when a student addressed whether the benefits of their life goals accrued primarily to themselves and people close to them, or to people they did not personally know. This classification produced four categories: *self, other, self and family* and *self and other*. Examples of quotations for each code category can be found in Table 3.

Students' open-ended answers were read several times in order to receive an overall picture of all possible life goals and reasoning that were mentioned. The first author then coded all the answers according to commonly agreed categories with the second author. The second author coded

40 percent of the answers on the basis of which kappa values were calculated. Kappa values .61-.80 signified substantial agreement and values of .81-1.0 almost perfect agreement (Landis & Koch, 1977). Disagreements were discussed. Further, or those categories in which kappa remained below .61, second coder analyzed another 40 percent of the answers. After this round, the health category was still below .61 and therefore for this category all of the answers were discussed and coded together.

Table 2

Life goal contents of Finnish social services students

Focus of goals	Goal categories	Robert and Robins (2000) N = 151 M (SD)	Open answers N = 137 n (%)	Reliability for coding of open answers κ	Examples of open answers
Other	Relationships	4.27 *(.81)*	70 (51)	.927	*The purpose of my life is to start a family*
	Social	3.71 *(.79)*	34 (25)	.766	*I also want to help others and do something for others*
	Religious (including spiritual growth)	1.89 *(1.05)*	11 (8)	.658	*Continue spiritual growth as a human being*
	Political influence (including general willingness to advance the collective good)	1.87 *(.84)*	26 (19)	.867	*I also want to influence society*
	Aesthetics	1.83 *(.92)*	2 (1)	1.0	*To develop as a dancer*
Self	Hedonistic	3.98 *(.70)*	27 (20)	.835	*To find the pleasures in life*
	Economic	2.93 *(.78)*	26 (19)	.848	*Your pay should guarantee a reasonable living*
	Happiness	-	82 (50)	.843	*To be happy*
	Self-actualization (doing personally meaningful things and work)	-	52 (38)	.854	*I know what I am interested in and what kinds of things I want to work with: I just need an avenue to express those desires*
	Health	-	23 (17)	.600	*To be as healthy as possible*

Note. Students may have named more than one life goal, so percentages in categories for open-ended answers add up to more than 100%.

Results

Other-focused and self-focused life goals

See Table 2. Overall the results are comparable to common youth aspirations in Finland in general (Myllyniemi, 2017).

Most of the social services students expressed self-focused goals. The goals of happiness and self-actualization were most often mentioned in their open-ended answers. Responses on the Life Goals Questionnaire, although lacking happiness and self-actualization options, showed high scores on hedonistic life goals, which have a similar focus on self. Economic goals were considered moderately important. Open-ended answers revealed that students were not interested in pursuing wealth and riches, but instead were focused on pursuing stable and reasonable living standards. Health was noted in 17 percent of students' open-ended answers. These responses balanced mental and physical well-being.

The Finnish social services students' other-focused life goals were directed or oriented mainly towards people they were close to, such as family and friends. Students also perceived social goals of helping other people as important, although surprisingly, this life goal was mentioned in open-ended answers only by 25 percent of the students.

Influencing society through political activity played a minor role for these students: students do not yet see themselves as active agents in advancing the collective good through communal or political means. Their frame of reference seemed to remain on a micro-level of interpersonal interaction instead of inducing societal practices which actually structure their future working conditions in social services. This result was unexpected due to the students' career choice as social services professionals whose work ethic is expected to benefit the collective good. But it is in line

with Finnish youth in general. Religious or aesthetic goals were not considered important, although it must be noted that, instead of religion, the students preferred to describe their life goals as spiritual growth.

Table 3

Focus of life goal reasoning

Focus of reasoning	Open answers *N* = 137 *n* (%)	Reliability for coding of open answers κ	Examples of open answers
Self	81 (59)	.883	*To live a good life according to your inner truth. In that way, I can actualize who I really am.*
Self and family	24 (18)	.708	*A good profession is important in order for me to provide for my child and family: to provide them with everything they need.*
Self and others	32 (23)	.762	*I have the opportunity to realize my full potential and have an obligation to do so for the collective good. Equality is important to me; I cannot tolerate inequality.*

Reasoning focus on self and others

See Table 3. No justifications with only an other-focus were found in our data. Fifty-nine percent of students justified their goals with a self-focus, such as "[To do good work, be happy.] In order for me to enjoy my life." In this example, the student concentrates on one's own perspective. Thus, the statement does not reflect genuine purpose because the prosocial, beyond-the-self element is missing (see Moran, 2009). Students also gave self-serving reasons for other-focused life goals, like the student who said, "[Helping others] makes me feel good about myself and I can feel that I am important." So, even if students had other-focused life goals, justifications revealed that they concentrated on benefits to themselves.

Eighteen percent of students demonstrated self- and family-focused justifications. They described how their goals benefited not only themselves but also those close to them. One student defined life goals as bringing about positive change to her family: "[To live a life that is personally

meaningful enough. To live in a way that my future family can be happy] - so that I and those closest to me feel good in this world." These students can be considered as having familial purpose.

Twenty-three percent of students justified their life goals with a self- and other-focus. Although they noted how their life goals benefited themselves, they also addressed benefiting people they do not know personally or advancing the collective good. These students seemed to dedicate their future to their helping profession. For example, one student described her purpose:

> [As a future kindergarten teacher (with a Bachelor's degree in Social Services), my goal is to raise, support, supervise and help children in their developmental tasks and in their lives in general. At the same time, I want to support parents in their child-rearing practices.] Because I feel this is important and this is what I have wanted to do since the age of 15. I feel this is my calling – I want to do the kind of work that gives something to me at the same time as I give something to others.

This reasoning illustrates how the student had a vision for her professional career. She had already found her purpose at a young age, which could be realized in her choice of career. Her case shows how purpose can provide a long-term vision and engagement.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine, within a framework of life purpose (Damon et al., 2003), Finnish social services students' self- and other-focused life goals and how they justify those goals. A life purpose is a life goal that benefits not only oneself but also others. Results of the study showed that Finnish social services students place importance on close relationships, and pursuing happiness, hedonistic experiences, and self-actualization. They consider helping others as important. However, influencing societal development through political or communal means was

not essential. Economic and health-related matters were moderately important, and expectations for these goals were described in a modest way. The goals related with religion and creative arts were least important for the students.

The majority of students justified their goals through benefits only to themselves. Approximately one-fifth of students showed purposeful thinking in relation with familial matters and approximately one-quarter named benefiting people they do not know or advancing the collective good. These students focused on family or unknown others exhibited purpose in their life goals by including beyond-the-self, prosocial reasoning for why their goals were important (see Damon et al., 2003; Moran, 2009). More specifically, the purposes of those students aimed to help people generally or the collective good related their personal life goals with the goals of their future profession. They were exemplars of the social services field's ethic of caring for others.

Our expectation for this study was that social services students would support other-focused life goals and relate their justifications with their future helping profession. We anticipated that benefiting others would have been strongly integrated in students' personal life goals. Instead, the students' life goals were similar to that of youth in general in Finland (Myllyniemi, 2017). Our study indicates that youth purposes seem to be more related with age-specific goals rather than the career-specific goals. Still, adolescence and college years have been associated with intensified purpose development (Bronk, 2014; Malin et al., 2013). Previous studies have shown that education in a helping profession such as social services promotes students' beyond-the-self intentions (Malin et al., 2013). However, even though the students in the present study valued helping and voluntary work on a general level, for the majority, their explicit reasoning and skills to see connections between personal and professional goals seemed to be lacking. Hence, our expectation that students would have been able to integrate the moral and ethical ideals and principles of the social services work into their personal life goals was not met.

Therefore, this study suggests that, in social services education, special attention should be paid to students' self-awareness of their life goals (Urdang, 2010), especially in regard to their other-focused goals. The students' capacity for purposeful moral and ethical reasoning in relation to their helping profession should be fostered explicitly. Other-focused motivation to advance the collective good can serve as a base for committed community service through political and other means (Malin et al., 2015), yet these ideas were not seen as main life goals by the majority of the students. The findings of this study may be useful for social work and social services' educators in Finland and abroad, since social work professionals who have developed a purpose are better equipped to face the stressors of the work than those who are merely self-focused (see Itzick et al., 2016). Furthermore, acknowledgement of age appropriateness of life goals may help educators to design courses and lectures to support individual paths to purpose.

One limitation of this study is that these findings are based on a rather small sample and nearly completely female. Social services work is very much a female-driven field (Liedgren & Elvhage, 2015), and females were also overrepresented in this study. Also when studying people's life goals, it is important to use caution in generalizing the results because of the likely willingness of informants to complete the questionnaires or describe their motives in a socially desirable manner (Liedgren & Elvhage, 2015). Thus, future research with larger samples and longitudinal research designs are needed to examine not only the categories of social services students' life goals, but also how these life goals form into purposes through development. Special focus within future research should be on how personal life goals can be integrated into professional education in helping professions.

In conclusion, this study attempted to determine the directions of Finnish social services students' life goals and how they justified those goals. We introduced the concept of life purpose into the context of social services and the cultural milieu of Finland, which provides an important

opening for further studies. The results of the study were unexpected in that most of the social services students did not define their life goals through purposeful, moral prosocial reasoning. On the contrary, self-focused goals and other-oriented familial goals seemed to describe these students. These findings suggest that professional development of social services students would benefit from including a purposeful work orientation as an intrinsic moral compass oriented toward the service of others (see Moran, 2009).

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